Letters That Send Children

Mr. F, Miss A and Mr. N form the word fan in a segment from "The Catching Game," one of the pilot programs for a series under production at Channel 9.

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Television quiz games are usually noted for the wondrous amount of unrelated trivia they provide. The format is indestructible, however, and educational television has made use of the TV-style quiz show in a segment of its "Letter People" puppet series being produced at KETC-TV in St. Louis.

In an episode called "The Catching Game," emcee Monte Swell (a parody of comedian Paul Lynde by St. Louis's Don Boevingloh) presides while frumpy-looking contestant Ruth Allen tries to arrange three letter-people to form the word "BAT."

In between Mr. Swell's idiotic remarks and bad puns, Ruth sounds out the word and then calls for Mr. B to enter the starting box. Mr. Swell shouts gleefully, and an unseen audience applauds her choice.

"We'll move into Round II," Mr. Swell announces, "right after this word . . ."

Then the children who watch the Channel 9 program as part of their in-school instruction will see a "commercial" about the various sounds of "a," as in "ah-choo."

The contestant then goes on to correctly place the letter people A and T in their proper boxes and is given appropriate prizes — a baseball bat and "from a far-away cave, a flying bat!"

The series is largely the work of Tom McDonough, who is writer, producer and director. McDonough, a former teacher, explained that he worked under guidelines established by the Alpha One reading program set up by New Dimensions in Education, in New York City, and that officials from this group examine his work carefully.

"We have produced 10 of the 'Letter People' series, so far," McDonough said, "and some of them have been tested in classrooms here. We hope to do 120 eventually. You can never be sure how an idea will work until it has been tried out on large numbers of pupils. It's a scary thing."